

A Tragic Reminder...

In remembrance of the 97 (and rising) people that died in The Station nightclub fire in West Warwick, R.I. Friday, Feb. 21, 2003.

In the Air Force, we pride ourselves on our outstanding record of low fire loss. Fortunately, we have not experienced such tragic loss on our installations. But most of us that have been around awhile can remember many close calls where we've commented "but for the Grace of God..."



Over the years, there have been many tragic fires in "night club" type public assembly occupancies. We have worked hard to make sure such incidents don't happen on Air Force installations. We have lost clubs to fire over the years, but we have not lost the people that

patronize them. Today, our clubs are among our safest facilities. They include sprinkler systems that make it near certain that the building will not burn down. New facilities are free from combustible materials (of construction) and usually have far more exits than the codes require.

So, what can we learn from this latest tragedy?



- People will try to escape through the same door they entered.
- Pyrotechnics must never be used inside clubs.
- Construction materials must be noncombustible.
- Combustible decorations are not allowed.
- Wall coverings, ceiling material, carpets must be in compliance with code.
- Club employee actions are the most important factor during emergency evacuation
- Enforcement of fire safety requirements must not be negotiated or compromised.

Now, let's discuss each bullet:

People will try to escape through the same door they entered. This is common knowledge in the fire safety community. Over and over, people have died immediately adjacent to other means of escaping from fire while steadfastly trying to get to the door through which they entered. This is the reason club employees must forcefully direct people to the nearest exit. They must be louder than the crowd and physically push people out the nearest exit.

Pyrotechnics must never be used inside clubs. It is amazing that club employees would even consider such dangerous activities. Such displays simply cannot be made safe. Club employees that agree to such must be watched closely because they are either not properly trained or don't care about the safety of club patrons.

Construction materials must be noncombustible. In this fire, the building was uninhabitable within three minutes after the fire started. The availability of "fuel" in the form of combustible surfaces was one of the biggest factors in this fire spread. Combustible surfaces must not be condoned in our clubs. If they cannot be removed, then need to be covered with noncombustible material.

Combustible decorations are not allowed. Combustible decorations are sometimes desired for atmosphere and because they're cheap. They are also deadly. They cause a fire to move so rapidly that evacuation is impossible. Curtains, draperies, bunting, and other vertically displayed materials are particularly dangerous.

Wall coverings, ceiling material, carpets must be in compliance with code. If we had to choose the single factor that impacts public safety more than any other, it would have to be the combustibility of interior surfaces. Coverings determine how deadly the atmosphere becomes and how fast the fire spreads. Surfaces absolutely must be controlled in every club.

Club employee actions are the most important factor during emergency evacuation. Do not become complacent in your emphasis on employee actions during the training of club employees. They must immediately begin forceful evacuation at the first sign of trouble. They must be loud and take charge. This is not the time to be timid. They must be accountable for the area they work in; making sure patrons are directed, physically if necessary, to the nearest exit.

Enforcement of fire safety requirements must not be negotiated or compromised. It's amazing that fire inspectors still find locked or blocked exits, the use of open flames (candles, for example) and improper storage of combustibles in our clubs. These situations create grave risk to patrons and require immediate intervention by fire safety personnel. It is not enough to identify the problem and leave. Fire safety personnel must do what it takes to fix such problems BEFORE they leave the facility. Such situations must always be documented, even when corrected on the spot, as they indicate a disregard for public safety. Repeated violations must be reported to senior leaders.

"Enforcement" is a part of the Air Force fire prevention programs that we often don't like to focus on. Neither do we like body recovery. Those are the two choices.

Our club managers and club staff must understand the critical nature of their actions during emergency. They must understand that patrons will attempt to exit the same way they came in and must be forcefully directed to use any other exit. They must understand that they must immediately begin evacuation procedures at the first sign of trouble, not after flames are rolling across the ceiling. They must know that they are accountable for the safety of their patrons.

The most important concern is that the facility, furnishings, and activities do not create a risk to public safety. For example, facilities cannot be occupied when required exits don't work. Combustible decorations are not allowed, period. Wall coverings and carpets must be of the proper type. Sources of combustion, such as candles, must be carefully contained or not used at all. Live Christmas trees are not allowed. Fire inspectors should not have to be fighting with the club staff to avoid these things that endanger their customers.

Fire inspectors are the enforcers of codes and standards. They serve at the pleasure of the installation commander. They act on behalf of the installation commander. If a fire occurs that they should have prevented, they are accountable to the installation commander. It is not enough to identify a hazard and leave it uncorrected. Fire inspectors do not leave a hazard in place. They correct it by whatever means necessary.


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